

Recent deaths cast light on Tri-City domestic violence

By Paula Horton, Herald staff writer



Herald/Paul T. Erickson

Julie Cooper is a domestic violence survivor who wants to use her experience to help others cope with their own physical and emotional trauma after she finishes school to become a psychologist. See story below.

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RICHLAND — Julie Cooper looks in the mirror now and knows she's a strong, competent woman who doesn't need a man to survive.

It's a stark contrast to how the 40-year-old Richland woman felt four years ago after her 12-year marriage ended and she was set up on a blind date with a man who later physically abused her.

The relationship turned sour nearly immediately, but she excused the name-calling and belittling as caused by drinking. She stayed with him as it got worse because "the prospect of being alone scared the crap out of me."

Cooper became one of nearly 1.3 million women in the nation each year who are physically assaulted by an intimate partner.

Domestic violence is one of the most common crimes in America, and like sex offenses, one of the most under-reported crimes, advocates say. Victims often suffer in silence because of fear, shame and secrecy.

But the recent deaths of two young women, allegedly at the hands of their ex-boyfriends, within two weeks of each other have highlighted domestic violence in the Tri-Cities.

"This is a terrible lesson for those two families, but it's a lesson for the whole community," said Kelly Abken, director of Domestic Violence Services of Benton & Franklin Counties. "I'm hopeful it's a wake-up call for the community."

The numbers show the recent domestic violence incidents are not isolated events.

Last year, there were 48,186 domestic violence offenses reported in the state -- a 13 percent increase over the 42,496 reported in 2008, according to statistics from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs.

Benton County law enforcement agencies reported 857 domestic violence offenses last year, while Franklin County agencies had 627.

There was essentially no change in Benton County from the 855 domestic violence offenses reported in 2008, but Franklin County saw a 9 percent increase when compared with 575 reported in 2008.

The top three offenses last year were simple assault (618 in Benton County and 431 in Franklin County), violations of no-contact orders (151 each in Benton and Franklin counties), and aggravated assaults (71 in Benton County and 34 in Franklin County).

Three homicides this year

No victims of domestic violence in the Tri-Cities were killed last year, but two of the three homicides in Franklin County so far this year are being linked to domestic violence.

"Domestic violence is one of the three major focuses of both our workload and our emphasis," said Franklin County Prosecutor Steve Lowe. "Gangs and domestic violence are the two most violent issues. Child sex (cases) is the other, and drugs are right in the middle of it."

Lowe said his office gets new domestic violence cases every week that cross all offense levels -- felony, misdemeanors and juvenile offenses.

In May, he filed murder charges in Franklin County Superior Court in two cases:

w Shenay Greenough, 19, of West Richland, was allegedly strangled on May 8 by Kurtis Robert Chapman, 22, of Pasco. Her body was found two days later under Chapman's Pasco home. He faces an Oct. 20 trial on charges of second-degree murder and first-degree manslaughter for the deaths of Greenough and her nearly full-term baby, Kyana Shenay.

w On May 24, 21-year-old Griselda Ocampo Meza was stabbed to death in her Pasco apartment, allegedly by her former live-in boyfriend, Gregorio Luna Luna. She had a 5-year-old son with Luna, but ended her seven-year relationship earlier this year after a series of assaults by him. She'd obtained a protection order against him, telling a judge she feared for her life. Luna, who was deported May 1 but recrossed the border and returned to Pasco the night before the attack, is charged with first-degree murder. His trial is set for Aug. 4.

The Tri-Cities once had the highest rate of domestic-violence related murders in the state, Abken said.

Since 1998, the community has had 31 deaths attributed to domestic violence. Of those, 21 were women, seven were men and three were children, according to Domestic Violence Services.

Statewide, 430 people were killed by domestic violence abusers between 1997 and 2008, according to the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The information is the most recent available.

Total domestic violence fatalities in that same time were 635. That includes 22 abusers killed by their victims in self-defense or probable self-defense.

Another 180 fatalities were abusers either killed by friends or family members of the victim, by law enforcement or by suicide. The remaining three were children killed by female domestic violence victims.

"Domestic violence can be lethal at any time," Abken said. "We have recently seen unfortunate tragedies of people being killed, but domestic violence will also kill your heart, your dreams and your spirit.

"It's a very, very hard life to live," she added.

Anyone can suffer

Domestic violence can affect people of any race, age, gender and income level. The majority of incidents are between men and women who had been in a romantic relationship, with men the primary aggressor. But there also are men victimized by women, siblings assaulting siblings and children beating parents.

Forty-one men who were killed in domestic violence cases from 1997-2008 died at the hands of a female abuser or a female abuser's associate, according to the 2008 fatality review.

Last year, Domestic Violence Services helped 172 women, 202 children and two men in the Tri-Cities who needed emergency shelter.

In addition to providing emergency housing for up to 30 days, Domestic Violence Services helps victims navigate the legal system, request protection orders and find counseling or support groups. The nonprofit agency also offers education and prevention training and runs a 24-hour crisis line.

The agency, which has been in the Tri-Cities since 2003, helped more than 1,600 clients get outreach services last year and answered nearly 8,400 calls on the crisis line.

Domestic violence abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, financial and psychological. Victims who are physically assaulted nearly always also suffer verbal and emotional abuse, Abken said.

Verbal and emotional abuse often is the precursor to being physically abused, she said. But Abken said some abusers never lay a hand on their victim.

"Verbal and emotional abuse is oftentimes the hardest to break free from," she said. "Bruises to bodies heal, but it's the bruises to our hearts and souls that are harder to overcome."

Power and control drive abusers. They often play mind games and have short tempers, which causes their victims to feel unsettled and like they must walk on eggshells around their abuser, advocates say.

Often the victim is in survival mode, just trying to get through the day without an incident, Abken said.

"If you're just trying to survive day to day, then it's hard to make plans for the future," she said. "So many perpetrators say, 'You're crazy,' and he's telling her it's her fault.

"Not all victims want the relationship to end, but they want the abuse to end."

What makes a victim finally leave an abuser is as different as the people involved.

Sometimes they put up with emotional abuse but draw the line when they get hit and they're out.

Why victims may stay

Kids also can be a driving force.

Often victims stay in an abusive relationship because they don't want to break up the family or the perpetrator threatens to keep the kids from the victim if she leaves.

Twice as many abusers file for full custody of children when a relationship ends than nonabusers, Abken said, because it's another way for them to try to continue to control their victims.

But once victims start seeing the effect the violence is having on their children, it can motivate them to leave.

Julie Cooper says that's what happened with her and her former boyfriend.

She stayed with her abusive live-in boyfriend for three years, partly because he convinced her she couldn't raise her now 14-year-old daughter on her own and because she didn't want to abandon his daughter, who was close to the same age.

The Herald is not naming Cooper's former boyfriend to protect his daughter's identity.

Cooper, a full-time psychology student who just graduated from Columbia Basin College and will attend Washington State University Tri-Cities in the fall, returned to him three times. She kept telling herself she could help him get better.

She said he spit in her face, hacked into her e-mail, threatened her daughter and called her names. He broke down two locked doors, held her face-down on the bathroom floor while screaming at her, then made her clean up the mess when he was done, she said.

The last time he hurt her was last year after he'd been drinking at the county fair. When they got home, he head-butted her in the face, then punched her in the back of the head as she tried to get away while telling her daughter to call police.

"What went through my head is I thought, 'This is so pathetic that I'm yelling to my 13-year-old daughter to call 911,'" Cooper said.

She later learned the two girls had locked themselves in the bathroom during the attack. She realized the effect it was having on her daughter and could no longer rationalize staying.

"I don't want her to think it's OK. It's not OK," Cooper said.

Initially, she was afraid to ask for help because she didn't want to look weak, but she soon learned she couldn't do it alone. She turned to friends and relatives and got help from Domestic Violence Services advocates.

Cooper says she's still dealing with her former boyfriend -- she constantly scans parking lots before she gets out of the car -- but she's not going to let him stop her.

"I'm not afraid of him," she said, noting that once the criminal case against him was over she took a vacation to Mexico by herself. "It was the best thing I ever did."

Her long-term goal now is to get her doctorate degree and counsel other domestic violence victims.

Cooper said she was glad her abuser was convicted of assaulting her and violating a no-contact order just after he left jail for the assault last August, but she felt the punishment was inadequate.

The 41-year-old Kennewick man was sentenced in Benton County District Court to seven days in jail for violating the court order and 10 days in jail for the domestic violence fourth-degree assault charge, but was allowed to serve both sentences on work release.

That meant he was required to spend the nights in jail, but was released during the day to go to work.

"To me, I think that sucker should have been there 24 hours a day," Cooper said. "I thought that was a little lenient."

Tougher sentencing OK'd

In June, tougher sentencing enhancements for repeated domestic abusers went into effect after being approved by the Legislature earlier this year, but that wouldn't have made a difference in Cooper's case.

The law, proposed by Attorney General Rob McKenna, changed how misdemeanor convictions for abusers are counted when they are convicted of a felony domestic violence offense.

"The key is that misdemeanor convictions will now be counted in sentencing for felony convictions," McKenna said. "In the old law, when an individual was convicted of felony domestic violence none of the misdemeanors were counted so their sentences didn't reflect that they had a prior criminal history."

The new law also increases the sentencing range for abusers with a prior felony domestic violence conviction. Now there's more weight given to that prior conviction, pushing the standard sentencing range up, McKenna said.

About 7-8 percent of domestic violence offenders will be affected by the new law, he said.

Take, for example, a person with no prior felony convictions who has two misdemeanor domestic violence convictions.

Before the stricter sentencing enhancement, if that person was convicted of first-degree domestic violence assault the middle of the standard sentencing range was nine years.

Now, however, the two prior misdemeanor convictions would increase the middle range sentence to 10 years and nine months.

It took two times for McKenna to successfully lobby the Legislature to pass the sentencing enhancements.

"We were tired of seeing a string of women and children victims," he said. "We're seeing offenders who commit a string of misdemeanor domestic violence assaults and end up pleading out to a misdemeanor level and they're causing tremendous harm, repeatedly victimizing one person or a series of victims."

McKenna said the new law also may increase victim cooperation in prosecutions.

Some victims in the past may not have wanted to testify, he said, because "they figure the guy's going to be out of jail in a matter of months. But by stiffening the sentence of serial offenders it gives them confidence."

McKenna said his office will be supporting continued funding for domestic violence services.

"We're moving in the right direction by empowering survivors to take action and treating domestic violence seriously in a way it was not in the past," he said. "And ... we're talking about what we can do with offenders -- if there's treatment and how does it work -- so we can break the pattern of behavior with treatment as well as punishment."

Offender programs include anger management, treatment and victim panels that abusers can be ordered to attend. The only way to end domestic violence is by stopping or changing the abuser's behavior, Abken said.

"Victims can't stop it no matter what they do," she said. "Fifty percent of perpetrators come from abusive homes but 50 percent don't. That other 50 percent are learning it somewhere. ... We can help all the victims in the world, but if we keep raising perpetrators it will never stop."

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/07/11/1088415/recent-deaths-of-2-women-highlight.html#ixzz0tVhWFJBS>